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ABSTRACT

Based on the idea that tolerance for disagreement is not other-directed but rather reflects a personality trait maintained by individuals across time and situation, a study was undertaken to develop a measure of tolerance for disagreement that would help further the conflict conceptualization by being able to predict negative affective interactions with procedural or substantive disagreement. To assess individual tolerance levels for disagreement, a Likert-type scale was developed and administered to 384 educators. Initially, 35 statements were used, representing both approach and avoidance of argumentative situations specific to interpersonal and group discussion contexts. Items were worded both positively and negatively. The subjects were asked to indicate the extent of their agreement with each item as it applied to them in their own communication contexts. Analysis of the data resulted in a 20-item scale that reflected face validity as well as sufficiently high reliability consistent with the conceptualization of the unidimensional nature of the tolerance for disagreement construct. The findings suggest that, while individual tolerance levels of disagreement varied, the impact of such levels on conflict situations requires empirical investigation. (FL)

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TOLERANCE FOR DISAGREEMENT:

INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT RECONCEPTUALIZED

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Tolerance for Disagreement:

Interpersonal Conflict Reconceptualized

A perusal of the literature on conflict, ranging from interpersonal to small groups to international contexts, suggests the need for an integrative analysis of the multitude of interpretations and reinterpretations of this construct. Not only does confusion exist over the conceptualization of conflict, but also, conflict connotes different evaluations. While some researchers label the nature of conflict or its outcomes as positive and productive for higher quality decisions[1], others evaluate conflict as a negative element which often results in conditions which most persons tend to avoid.[2] By adding another symbol to the relative primitive, conflict, this paper tends to merge both positive and negative evaluations into a framework which satisfies empirical observations while maintaining consistency with the layperson's notion of the nature of conflict. By discriminating between two concepts often used interchangeably, disagreement and conflict, more precise relational statements can be deduced for subsequent testing and validation. This conceptual model will provide the framework for the empirical development of an individual differences measure designed to predict differential orientations to tolerance for disagreement.

While researchers have noted definitional and conceptual confusion associated with the conflict construct[3], others have attempted to determine empirically the precise nature of conflict.

For instance, Ellis and Fisher[4] observed conflict in ongoing groups as developmental. The initial phase is characterized by interpersonal conflict, followed by a second phase labeled confrontation, and culminating in substantive conflict. However, differentiations between positive, purposeful conflict messages and negative, detrimental conflict messages are not considered. That is, while most researchers would contend that conflict can be good or bad, operationalizations of conflict do not discriminate between the two polarizations.

In an effort to clarify differential evaluations of the construct, McCroskey and Wheeless[5] maintain that "conflict and disagreement are not the same thing" (p. 247). The authors characterize conflict as "competition, hostility, suspicion, distrust and self-perpetuation" (p. 247). Disagreement, on the other hand, is defined simply as "differences of opinion on issues" (p. 247). Teigen[6] further argues that disagreement is often perceived as conflict or at least a prelude to conflict. Ellis and Fisher[7] suggest that "disagreement interacts" may be differentiated from conflict (i.e., interpersonal or confrontation as opposed to substantive conflict). While these writers fail to explicitly define the parameters of both constructs, they do suggest the viability of symbol differentiations. By examining existing empirical evidence pointing to the nature or dimensionality of conflict, a new conceptual model underlying both disagreement and conflict emerges.

Dimensions of Conflict

Observations of communication activity in decision-making groups have produced various models reflecting small group interaction as three-dimensional--information or substantive activity, interpersonal or affective activity, and procedural or metadiscussional activity.[8] The substantive dimension relates to ideas and content relevant to the small group task. Procedural activity refers to regulation or interactions--that is, the specific means selected to process information. Affective behaviors consist of interactions about feelings or attitudes of the group members[9].

Knutson and Kowitz[10] were reasonably successful in creating conflict along at least two of these dimensions--affective and substantive. Knutson, Lashbrook, and Heemer[11] further determined that persons perceived conflict as more than a two-factor structure of substantive and affective conflict. When recalling their own experiences in conflict groups, subjects reported additional perceived dimensions of procedural and general evaluation of small group conflict. While the affective, substantive, and procedural conflict appears to fall along the communication activities noted by other small group researchers, this final overall general evaluation dimension served to assess whether the outcome of conflict was perceived as functional or dysfunctional. This fourth dimension, then, pertains to individual's attitude toward conflict rather than perceptions of the characteristics of conflict itself.

Most recently, Knutson, Hurt, and Lashbrook[12] replicated the same three-factor structure reported by Knutson, et al.[13]

under a different stimulus situation (i.e., actual small group exercise designed to initiate conflict). Using scales developed by Knutson, et al.,[14] subjects were also able to discriminate among messages which were indicative of procedural, affective, and substantive conflict. Once again, conflict was validated as multidimensional.

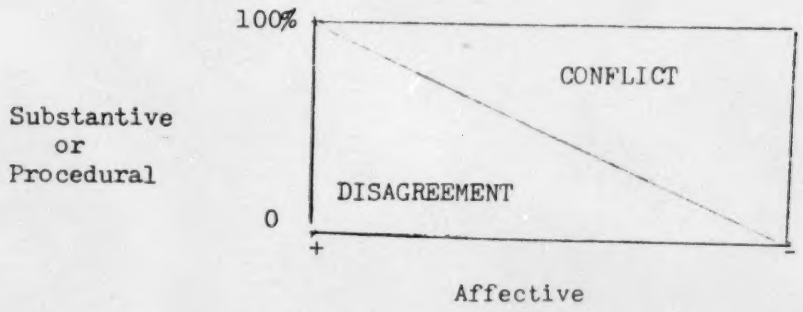
Yet Knutson et al.[15] warn that the development and validation of scales designed to isolate these three conflict types should not be mistaken for the actual explanation of the construct. However, further examination of the data points to some interesting implications for conceptualization as antecedent to explanation of the construct. While subjects could differentiate among three levels based on messages designed to discriminate substantive, procedural and affective conflict, Knutson et al.[16] discovered that high levels of affective conflict were perceived across the other dimensions as well. It appears then, that conflict is inextricably tied to the affective dimension; no matter whether groups are engaged in disagreements over ideas or procedures.

This observation is consistent with general evaluations or attitudes toward conflict. Most persons tend to view conflict as irritating and often times, dysfunctional. While agreement may be reinforcing to individuals and indicative of an approach response, conflict results in avoidance activity. For instance, Hoffman and Maier[17] report that group members tend to avoid discussions which represent conflicting points of view. Gouran and Baird[18] also

found an avoidance response when small groups engaged in conflict. On the other hand, Bormann[19] maintains that groups prefer the maintenance of pleasant atmospheres which result in substantial agreement.

Conflict and Disagreement Reconceptualized

By adding yet another symbol to the relative primitive of conflict, an extension or modification of the construct emerges. Differentiating states of disagreement from states of conflict serves to incorporate the multiple dimensions delineated above as well as account for the negative and positive evaluations of conflict. According to this new paradigm, disagreement over substantive and procedural issues coupled with negative affect produces a conflict state. It is not the substance and procedures or the feelings which produce conflict, but the interaction between the two. Similarly, disagreement is conceptualized as the interaction of the substantive and procedural dimension with more positive levels of affect. The following diagram serves to illustrate this theoretical perspective:

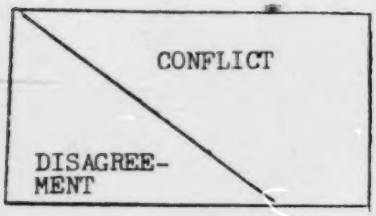


With this model, persons can be diametrically opposed on ideas or procedures while projecting positive feelings on the affective dimension. Such "disagreement" connotes positive, helpful orientations. Disagreement, then, serves a useful function for decision-making groups, previously referenced as functional conflict by other researchers.[20]

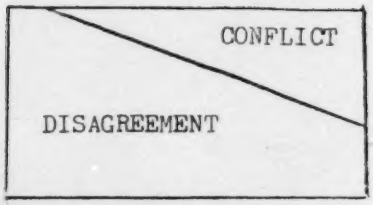
The dysfunctional nature of "conflict" noted by others[21], occurs when levels of disagreement over either substantive or procedural issues interacts with a corresponding decrease in positive affect. According to this conceptual model, one can predict at what point conflict will occur. The amount of affect toward another person predicts his/her ability to proceed with disagreeing statements while still maintaining productivity in the relationship. Conflict, consistent with the layperson's connotation, is a negative element in interpersonal contexts and harmful to productive interactions or delineations.

Tolerance for Disagreement

Given this orientation toward conflict and disagreement, it also seems useful to look at individual differences. That is, some individuals may be able to tolerate more or less disagreement than others before dysfunctional states of conflict occur. In this case, the discriminating line changes:



Person A



Person B

According to these new illustrations, Person A may have a low tolerance for disagreement. In this case, Person A is unable to tolerate much disagreement before the disagreeing messages produce a condition of conflict. Conversely, Person B may have a high tolerance for disagreement. This individual is able to tolerate much higher levels of disagreement over substantive or procedural issues before negative evaluations of conflict are perceived. Tolerance for disagreement, according to this conceptualization, is not other-person specific or other-person directed. Rather, tolerance for disagreement reflects a personality trait maintained by individuals across time and situation.

Crandall[22] introduced intolerance for disagreement as a personality trait that purports to predict likeableness of individuals. That is, persons who reported an intolerance for disagreement also reported an intolerance for ambiguity (.50 correlation). Further, subjects intolerant of ambiguity scored highest on measures of "docile forms of interpersonal behavior (p. 138)," while tolerant subjects reported more aggressive and competitive behaviors. To

suggest that intolerance of disagreement is an antecedent to perceptions of liking is somewhat naive in the context of interpersonal or small group discussions. However, the relationship between liking or affect to disagreement and conflict cannot be understated. While Crandall proposed intolerance for disagreement as a means to assess yet another personality trait, our purpose is to develop a tolerance for disagreement measure in an effort to differentiate disagreement and conflict conceptually and operationally. Even though Crandall designed a measure of intolerance of disagreement, the researcher failed to report exactly how the scales were developed. Consequently, validity of the instrument itself is questionable. Further, no internal reliability procedures are evidenced in his report.

This study, then, seeks to develop a measure of tolerance for disagreement which satisfies methodological criteria as well as to discover if persons will self-report differential levels of their own tolerance for disagreement as an overall unidimensional personality trait. Ongoing future research can then be directed at predicting when conflict will occur in ongoing interpersonal or small group discussions. More specifically, the measure of tolerance for disagreement will help to further the conflict conceptualization by being able to predict negative affective interactions with procedural and/or substantive disagreement.

Subjects and Procedures

In order to assess individual tolerance levels for disagreement, a Likert-type self-report scale was selected. Besides the ease of administration of such scales, the Likert-type approach is typically noted for its high reliability. Initially, 35 Likert statements were generated by the researchers, representing both approach and avoidance of argumentative situations specific to interpersonal and group discussion contexts. In order to reduce possible response set, items were worded both positively and negatively. Consistent with the Likert format, a seven-step response option was developed ranging from strongly agree (scored as 1) to strongly disagree (scored as 7). The scale was then administered to 384 West Virginia elementary and secondary school teachers and administrators who were voluntarily enrolled in a graduate extension class of instructional communication. Subjects were asked to indicate the extent of agreement or disagreement with each item as it applied to themselves in their own communication contexts. Responses were scored and reflected so that higher scores represented higher tolerance levels for disagreement and lower scores represented lower tolerance levels.

Results

Data were submitted to principal components factor analysis and varimax rotation. Eigenvalues less than 1.0 terminated rotation. Using the scree procedure, plotted eigenvalues suggested an initial two-dimensional structure of the tolerance construct. Fifty-seven

percent and fourteen percent of the variance was accounted for by the first and second factors respectively. A forced two-factor solution showed that positively worded items loaded on one factor and negatively worded items loaded the second factor. Consequently, the two-factor solution was artifically imposed due to directionality of wording, rather than content. Consistent with the conceptualization then, tolerance for disagreement was demonstrated to be a unidimensional construct.

Item-total correlations above .50 determined initial criterion for item selection. An instrument based on this criterion (12 positively worded items and 8 negatively worded items) produced a split-half reliability of .88. A second criterion was applied--selection of equal numbers of both positively and negatively worded items to reduce potential response bias. This required the elimination of the two lowest correlated positively worded items and the inclusion of the next two highest correlated negatively worded items. This 20-item scale resulted in a split-half reliability of .90. Consequently, the instrument containing 10 negatively phrased and 10 positively phrased items was chosen for future use. Compared to the earlier version of this scale, this instrument resulted in the better solution--a reduction in possible responses bias as well as increased reliability. Table 1 reports the resulting 20-item scale, principal components factor loadings for the first unrotated factor for each item, and the item-total correlations for each item.

(Insert Table 1 About Here)

To check for normality of the 20-item solution, a chi-square goodness-of-fit test showed the frequencies of sample intervals did not differ significantly from expected frequencies of corresponding intervals in a normal distribution ($x^2 = 8.4739$, df = 7, $p < .05$; $x^2 = 14.07$ required for significance, $p < .05$). The mean of the sample data was 84.05, while the standard deviation was 16.37. Responses ranged from 36 to 128, with a possible range of 20 to 140.

Discussion

The resulting 20-item scale reflects face validity as well as sufficiently high reliability (.90) consistent with our conceptualization of the unidimensional nature of the Tolerance for Disagreement construct. While individual tolerance levels of disagreement do vary, the impact of such levels on conflict situations requires empirical investigation. Using an earlier, modified version of the Tolerance for Disagreement scale, Teigen[23] found a significant negative relationship between individuals tolerance level for disagreement and communication apprehension. Further predictive validity of this modified instrument is reported to have significant, but low correlations with opinion leadership, competence, extroversion, self-esteem, and innovativeness.[24] Continued research of the Tolerance for Disagreement construct as it applies to organizational contexts is currently in progress.[25] These researchers are predicting a relationship between tolerance for disagreement and supervisor and employee satisfaction.

We suggest that individual tolerance levels for disagreement may be predictive of the occurrence of conflict in ongoing interpersonal and small group discussions. That is, individuals highly tolerant of disagreement may engage in more constructive problem-solving strategies in potential conflict-producing communication situations. Conversely, individuals low in tolerance for disagreement may proceed more quickly to discussions characterized by high negative affect--resulting in dysfunctional conflict states. Perhaps such individuals may initiate more interactions detrimental to conflict management. Additionally, low tolerant individuals may avoid potential conflict producing situations entirely or engage in consensual behaviors evidenced in groupthink.[26]

In any case, varying levels of tolerance for disagreement may have considerable implications for interpersonal, small group, and organizational contexts. Deteriorating dyads, problem-solving committees, management-labor disputes and other contexts typified by dysfunctional conflict, may all require examination of individual tolerance levels for disagreement. For instance, organizations may increase discussions of disagreement necessary for organizational change as well as reduce potential conflict by selecting arbitrators who willingly approach disagreement and tolerate argumentative discussions without engaging in negative affective interactions detrimental to change.

Additionally, isolation of the communicative behaviors indicative of management or mismanagement of potential conflict-

producing situations may well be obtained through observations of high and low tolerance for disagreement levels of individuals engaged in such discussions. Such information may yield communication strategies designed to maintain appropriate levels of functional disagreement without engaging in detrimental behaviors associated with conflict.

FOOTNOTES

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[8]M. Burgoon, J. K. Heston, and J. C. McCroskey, Small Group Communication: A Functional Approach. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1974; see also, D. S. Gouran, The Process of Group Decision-Making. New York: Harper and Row, 1974.

[9]T. J. Knutson, V. Hashbrook, and A. D. M. Heemer, "Dimensions of Small Group Conflict: A Factor Analytic Study." Paper presented

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[10]T. J. Knutson and A. C. Kowitz, "Effects of Information Type and Orientation on Consensus-Achievement in Substantive and Affective Small-Group Conflict." Central States Speech Journal, in press.

[11]T. J. Knutson, V. Lashbrook, and A. D. M. Heemer, ibid.

[12]T. J. Knutson, H. T. Hurt, and V. Lashbrook, "Scales for the Measurement of Small Group Conflict: Development and Validation." Paper presented at the International Communication Association Conference, Berlin, West Germany, 1977.

[13]T. J. Knutson, H. T. Hurt, and V. Lashbrook, ibid.

[14]T. J. Knutson, H. T. Hurt, and V. Lashbrook, ibid.

[15]T. J. Knutson, H. T. Hurt, and V. Lashbrook, ibid.

[16]T. J. Knutson, H. T. Hurt and V. Lashbrook, ibid.

[17]L. R. Hoffman and N. R. F. Maier, N. R. F. "Valence in the Adoption of Solutions by Problem-Solving Groups: II. Quality and Acceptance as Goals of Leaders and Members." Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1967, 6, 175-182.

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TABLE 1

Factor Loadings and Item-Total Correlations of the Tolerance for Disagreement Scale

	Items	Factor Loading	Item-Total Correlation
1.	It is more fun to be involved in a discussion where there is a lot of disagreement.	-.50	-.48
2.	I enjoy talking to people with points of view different than mine.	- 53	-.55
3.	I don't like to be in situations where people are in conflict.	.63	.66
4.	I prefer being in groups where everyone's beliefs are the same as mine.	.46	.51
5.	It doesn't take very long for me to get in conflict with another person.	-.42	-.37
6.	Arguments are generally helpful.	-.51	-.52
7.	I prefer to change the topic of discussion when disagreement occurs.	.55	.57
8.	Conflict over issues, facts, and ideas leads to high quality decisions.	-.38	-.39
9.	I tend to create conflict in conversations because it serves a useful purpose.	-.53	-.51
10.	I enjoy arguing with other people.	-.69	-.64
11.	I would prefer to work independently rather than to work with other people and have arguments.	.59	.61
12.	I would prefer joining a group where no conflict occurs.	.67	.67

TABLE 1

(Continued)

13.	I am not afraid to tell another person s(he) is wrong.	-.29	-.35
14.	I don't like to disagree with other people.	.63	.62
15.	Given a choice, I would leave a conversation rather than continue an argument.	.69	.70
16.	People who disagree with my point of view bother me.	.48	.53
17.	I avoid talking with people who I think will disagree with me.	.46	.52
18.	I enjoy arguing with others.	-.66	-.63
19.	Disagreements stimulate a conversation and cause me to communicate more.	-.65	-.64
20.	It makes me nervous when people argue.	.57	.63